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The world of Laurie Monroe

In a way, Laurie Monroe's adult life has been a metaphor for her father's work, a sort of out-of-body experience all its own.

Monroe left Nelson County and the Monroe Institute in adolescence to attend boarding school and college, then entered the real estate business in Florida. But like one of the "pioneers" in a Robert Monroe experiment, she always knew she would return to her starting point.

"Dad and I talked about it from time to time," she said, "and when he was ready to leave, I was ready to take over."

Laurie Monroe spoke to the local Meta Group at Central Virginia Community College on St. Patrick's Day, a date that was also the fifth anniversary of her father's "transition."

"I wanted to bring a birthday cake to the talk," said Rosie McKnight, one of the Meta Group organizers and a former colleague of Bob Monroe, "so I went over to Kroger's and ordered a chocolate cake with green icing and the inscription: 'Happy 5th Birthday, Dad.'

"I got kind of a strange look. Then I added, 'He died five years ago, so it's his fifth birthday in the spirit.' The lady said, 'Oh.' But she wound up putting 'In The Spirit' in capital letters."

On the day her father died of pneumonia in 1995, Monroe recalled, "I decided to take a nap in late afternoon, and after awhile I felt the familiar sensation of being pulled out of my body. I floated out and away when I suddenly saw my father with Nancy, my stepmother (who had died earlier). Nancy looked radiant, young and full of vigor. My father smiled at me and they both hugged me. The next sensation I had was of being a baby held by my father, who was gently placing me in my crib. Actually, he was putting me back in my body."

When she awoke, Bob Monroe had ... gone. But, said his daughter, "I knew that our connection would continue forever."

This all may sound odd to you. It sounds odd to me. Yet the Monroe Institute is not a place of smoke and mirrors, but a laboratory where Robert Monroe set out to explain his own "voyages" scientifically.

"When these experiences first started happening to him," Laurie Monroe said, "he thought he was dying. It scared him. They started when I was seven, and he didn't tell me about them until I was 10."

The dedication to Robert Monroe's first book, "Journeys Out of the Body," reads: "To Laurie, who lived through this with much unconcern." By then, the Monroe Institute (TMI) had been established on the side of a Nelson County mountain, a colony of kindred spirits had sprung up around it, and Monroe's "Hemi-Sync" tapes were being distributed nationwide. All because Bob Monroe — an engineer by trade — wanted to figure out what was going on.

"Gradually, he came to realize that the body is not a physical box," Laurie Monroe said.

And he passed along to her the belief that it is possible to leave that box and travel to other places, or other dimensions. Like "The Park."

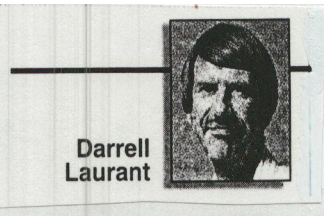
"Many people who have been through the Gateway program have visited a place that felt like a park," she said. "It had vegetation, and it even had animals. This is where people go after they die, to recuperate and figure out what to do next."

Gateway is open to anyone with $1,600 and a sense of adventure. Several times a day during your week at TMI, you will enter your personal CHEC ("Controlled Holistic Environmental Chamber'), where you will be deprived of light and sound (except for the tapes) and gently moved toward a deep meditative state.

"We can't guarantee an out-of-body experience, though," Laurie Monroe said, "because of the fear factor."

TMI is hooked up with several university research projects, run by people who may or may not believe in "The Park," but think Robert Monroe might have been on to something. As TMI's heiress apparent, meanwhile, Laurie Monroe is interested in "holistic healing" and changing our society's view of death.

And answering her favorite question: "Is there really any separation between 'here' and 'there?' "



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